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THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF THE SON IMMANUEL.

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Isa. 7:14, **חִנֵּה הָעֲלֹמִיה֙ הָרָה וַיְלֹתָה֙ בָּן־וְקִרְאָת֙ שֶׁמֶן־עַמְנוּאֵל**; “Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”

Septuagint, ’Ιδού ἡ παρθένος ἐν γαστρὶ λήμψεται καὶ τέξεται νήν καὶ καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἐμμανουὴλ; “Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and thou shalt call his name Emmanuel.”

Matt. 1:23, ’Ιδού ἡ παρθένος ἐν γαστρὶ ἔξει καὶ τέξεται νήν, καὶ καλέσουσιν τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἐμμανουὴλ; “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel.”

THE TEXT.

THE Hebrew may be read, “she shall call,” or “thou (fem.) shalt call.” With a slight vowel change it would read “thou (masc.) shalt call.” The Septuagint, with which the other Greek versions agree, renders “thou shalt call,” without of course any indication of gender. If the second person is adopted, it must be in the masculine form, as the prophet was addressing the king. Matthew, apparently quoting the Septuagint from memory, has “they shall call.” He has also the more common form *ἔξει* instead of *λήμψεται*.

The meaning of *almah*, translated *παρθένος*, “virgin,” is not certain. Generally it seems to signify a young marriageable woman, but it is possibly used of those already married, as we should speak of a bride. The Septuagint several times translates the word by *νεᾶντος*, “young woman” (Exod. 2:8; Pss. 46:1; 68:26; Song of Songs, 1:3; 6:8). In none of these passages is the idea of virginity implied; the natural translation would be the more general word “maiden.” In two instances—our passage and Gen. 24:43—the Septuagint renders *almah* by *παρθένος*, doubtless understanding the Hebrew to signify a young woman soon to be married.

Had the prophet desired to make the idea of virginity emphatic, he would undoubtedly have used the word בָּתִלְלָה (Gen. 24: 16); for, while this word does not necessarily imply virginity, and may even have been used of a bride, as indeed παρθένος was also, it is beyond question the more accurate term to apply to a virgin as such.

However, the meaning of the word is really not of great importance, for even if the prophet was speaking of a virgin, he does not at all imply that she remained a virgin when she conceived and bore the son. The sign to king Ahaz was of a different character.

THE OLD TESTAMENT CIRCUMSTANCES.

The quotation belongs to the oracles of Isaiah delivered when Ahaz was filled with terror by the alliance of Israel and Syria against him. He had conceived the idea, which he probably considered a brilliant piece of statecraft, of inviting the Assyrian king to come to his assistance. Isaiah, who well understood that the Assyrians sought tributaries and not allies, used every means to turn the king from his fatuous policy, assuring him that Pekah and Rezin, "two tails of smoking firebrands," were not to be feared. When the king persisted, Isaiah offered him a sign, a miracle, to accredit his message as from Jehovah. Ahaz, not desiring to be convinced, hypocritically refused to tempt Jehovah. Thereupon Isaiah uttered the striking oracle, 7: 13-17.

There is nothing to indicate that the sign which was to be given was the miraculous conception of a child. The oracle would have been the same if the prophet had said, "Behold, a maiden shall be married and shall bear a son," etc. The sign is in the name of the child, and in the political conditions occurring within the time of the child's birth and growth.

The sign is twofold: of grace and of wrath. Isaiah has repeatedly asserted that God is with his people, if they will but trust him. Now he declares that God's presence to defend shall be manifest within a year. When the maiden, now about to marry, shall bear her child within the year, the political circumstances of Judah will be such that, naming the child, as was customary, in accordance with the conditions of the national

life, it shall be fitting to call him Immanuel, "God is with us." No extraordinary child is implied by the name. Ahaz's own son was called Hezekiah, "Jehovah hath strengthened." The meaning of the sign is: the danger from Israel and Syria shall be removed, for God is with us. That this is the interpretation is evident from its repetition in the following chapter (8:10).

But there is menace also in the sign. Another point of time is indicated a few years later than the child's birth. The expression in vs. 15, "when he knoweth to refuse the evil and choose the good," may mean the age of moral choice, or more probably the time of weaning, when the child begins to choose the food it desires. This in the East would be at about three years of age, and would correspond with the indication of time in the parallel prophecy (8:4). Before the child shall have reached the age when it can choose its food, the only food left in the land will be curds and honey. The spoiler will have destroyed the vineyards and trampled the grain-fields. Only the wild produce of the land will be left (*cf.* 7:21-25); for, while before this time the two confederate kings will have been destroyed, the dire calamity of Assyria will also have come upon Judah.

It may be noted that in the eighth chapter, where Isaiah repeats his prophecy in public form, the sign to the people is again the birth of a child with symbolic name. And again the important point is an indication of time, for before the child shall be able to talk the evil shall come.

This interpretation of the prophecy would be sufficient, if it were not for the recurrence of the name Immanuel in the eighth chapter, and for the striking child-prophecy in the ninth chapter. Clearly, Immanuel (8:8) is thought of as the prince of the land. Either there has been a development in the prophet's thought of the child, or he intended something more definite in his first reference to the maiden and Immanuel. If it could be supposed that by the *almah* was meant the young king's bride, and that the predicted child was Hezekiah, we should have a most striking messianic prophecy. Then Isaiah would say: "O House of David, God will send us the promised Prince, and his coming shall be a sign of the divine presence with us, but his upgrowing

shall not be in blessing, for thou hast forsaken Jehovah." Quite naturally, then, the land of Immanuel could be referred to in the later oracle, and the coming King could be idealized as the Wonderful Counselor, etc. This would all be entirely in accordance with the principles of messianic prophecy. Very natural, then, would be the direct address to the house of David, and the reading, "thou shalt call his name," would be confirmed. The rabbis so interpreted the passage, and modern commentators see the force of it; but all suggest the insuperable objection that Hezekiah was nine years old, according to the received chronology, when the prophecy was uttered.¹

Among many other interpretations, it is held that the child is the son of Isaiah himself, or an ideal child, or the child of Zion. If the reference to Hezekiah cannot be accepted, it is probably better to take the birth and growth of the child as simply indications of time, and to understand that the idea of a coming child of promise grew in the prophet's mind into the prince of the land and into the great Prince of Peace.

THE NEW TESTAMENT QUOTATION.

Matthew quotes the oracle of Isaiah as a definite prediction of the virgin birth of Jesus. It is probable that he intends the quotation as part of the angel's speech to Joseph in his dream, and that the miracle of the conception is itself the "sign." Yet, while at least a dozen different interpretations may be given to the sign in Isa. 7:14, it is impossible from that passage to derive the idea of supernatural birth, or to imagine that any Jewish reader would so have understood it.

In point of fact, the New Testament writers, as indeed the most learned rabbis of their day, had little concern with the historical significance of a biblical passage. They understood and used a quotation for what it said in itself without regard to its first meaning or its context.

There is little reason to be surprised at this when so large a proportion of modern Bible readers would turn from Matt. 1:23

¹ The writer still holds to the opinion, stated in his article, "A Chronological Discussion of the Virgin Oracle of Isaiah," published in the BIBLICAL WORLD, July, 1895, that the chronological objection to this interpretation is not insuperable.

to Isa. 7:14 and, finding them in agreement, would never think of making further examination. Did not our preachers at the time of a recent disaster quote the line, "One touch of nature makes the whole world kin," without a thought of its Shakespearean setting? The verbal expressiveness of quotations is often sufficient even in our critical times.

The New Testament writers were imbued with the great truth that the Old Testament pointed forward to Christ. They realized that he was the fulfilment of all the old ideals. How natural, then, that every striking phrase in the sacred books which was suggested to their minds by some incident in Jesus' life should be regarded as a direct prediction!

And, indeed, there is no little inner justification for such a quotation as the one in hand. Whether or not Isa. 7:14 was regarded as specifically messianic, certainly the series of oracles, Isa., chaps. 7-9, culminates in the noblest messianic expectation. How natural that Joseph himself, in connection with the divine intimation of the purity of his virgin betrothed, should remember the passage where the virgin was spoken of as the mother of Immanuel! Would not the Messiah thus announced be Immanuel indeed? And would he not fulfil in himself all that Isaiah had promised?

Of course, the oracle of Isaiah is not a proof to a modern Christian that Jesus was born of a virgin. He must satisfy himself on other grounds that the Savior came thus in wondrous advent. Yet it is an indication of the beautiful appropriateness of this use of Isaiah's noble passage by Matthew that the critical student today will find true religious value in the quotation, notwithstanding his clear recognition of its historical meaning.